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External pressures on awarding bodies

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I have to start by declaring that I am not a trained historian and so I am unable to talk about pedagogy, or the content of, or the philosophy behind, our syllabus. I will talk, instead, about the external pressures that impinge upon Awarding Bodies when we are developing and running a syllabus – mainly generally, but also, to some extent, with specific reference to [Edexcel](#) and the [Edexcel GCE in History](#). Coming at it from this angle might answer some questions that people have about why things are the way they are, and demonstrate that we are not entirely free agents in the process.

The regulatory authorities

The regulatory authorities – for us, of course, primarily the [Qualifications and Curriculum Authority](#) (QCA) – affect our activity in three main ways:

- **Subject criteria**

These pre-determine how a syllabus is structured, how it is assessed and, to some extent, what it contains. We have to abide by these criteria, and it is the QCA's job to ensure that we do.

- **Accreditation**

Having written a syllabus we have to submit it to the QCA to check that it conforms to the subject criteria and that it does the job it is intended to do; there is room for negotiation here, but in the end we have to accept the QCA's judgement.

- **Assessment and awarding standards**

The QCA makes regular checks to ensure we are following procedures properly and awarding to correct standards.

The commercial environment

It is important to understand first of all that there is no blank cheque from the government for running exams; commercial environment or not, developing syllabi, and setting and marking exams is very expensive, and we have to be financially rigorous. The second point is that the commercial culture was well established before the take-over of Edexcel by [Pearson](#). It could be maintained that one impact of this commercial environment on the classroom is the tendency of market-led activity to reduce choice and hence to reduce options – if a subject is not popular, it cannot be afforded. However, the counter arguments to this view should be noted:

- Less popular options are difficult to award as they provide such a small sample, so there is an issue of standards and fairness here.
- There are other ways to introduce minority interest topics – for example, through coursework – which Edexcel has done in recent syllabus revision.

Finally on this point, the commercial culture in education alters our relationship with teachers – again, this is by no means exclusive to Edexcel. I am thinking here in particular about the infiltration of a commercial lexicon – the syllabus becomes a 'specification' or 'product,' the teacher becomes a 'customer,' the educational world becomes a 'market', and so on. One result of the alteration of this relationship could be that the syllabus has become less a description of educational opportunities and more a contract, with consequent effects upon the way it is written (for example, a need to cover every eventuality, to lay things out with legalistic explicitness) and hence, of course, upon the way that it is taught.

Other pressures

Interest groups

- **The Historical Association**

The Historical Association Report was read carefully and, where we agreed, we took note of what it said.

- **Embassies**

The German embassy lobbied fairly heavily to try to counteract emphasis on Nazi period in our history teaching, but was, it has to be said, chasing the wrong hare by lobbying us; the Japanese embassy also made similar points.

- **Publishers**

This is, perhaps, a tangential issue, but we do have, to some extent, a symbiotic relationship with publishers, and I think that this is therefore a relevant point as it links with the market effect on choice and the loss of minority subjects: where there is no prospect of sales, books on that topic will not be published, so there are fewer resources, so fewer teachers will take it up, so it becomes less popular, and so on.

The socio-political context

Should we offer, for example, 'women's' history, or 'black' history? We are, of course, part of the social construct and we do respond to this, though probably tardily, and not, of course, as fully as some groups might like. This is, however, a huge subject which I will leave to others to explore more fully.

I hope that this talk has managed, even if somewhat briefly, to give you some idea of the external pressures on Awarding Bodies, and alerted you to some of the issues we face when designing and running syllabi.

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